

Fifth Sunday of Lent

Dear Parishioners and Friends,

This weekend we will be shrouding statues and images in the church to mark the run-up to Holy Week which used to be called Passiontide. You will have to trust me as none of you, confined as you are to your homes, will be able to visit your parish church to see for yourselves this annual sombre visual reminder of the Lord's suffering which sets the stage for the drama we would, again in normal circumstances, be celebrating and re-enacting next week. Given that few if any churches in Europe, beyond monastic communities perhaps, will be marking Holy Week and the Easter Triduum with the complex liturgies which carry us to the heart of the Paschal mystery, we must engage in some lateral thinking.

What is true of our diocese, our cathedral and our parish churches, will also be true of the Diocese of Munich. That there is a link with Munich is not accidental. The impact of Covid-19 on the Diocese of Munich is even more severe than elsewhere because this year, 2020, a small town in the Alpine foothills of Bavaria has scheduled the graphic visual representation of the dramatic events of the first Holy Week in what is known as the Passion Play. The town is Oberammergau. The whole town community re-enacts every ten years the Lord's passion as an act of thanksgiving for having been spared in a plague several centuries ago. It remains an open question as to whether the Passion Play, scheduled for the summer, will actually take place. There will certainly be no Holy Week processions in Seville or Zamora, despite the great suffering being currently borne by the people of Spain. This Holy Week your home can become a small Oberammergau, you can relive the Lord's Passion with your family in your living room. You can use your desk/lap-top to visit virtually every art gallery in the world where the passion story is depicted in countless works of priceless painting or sculpture. You can listen to the Passions of Johan Sebastian Bach: the St. Matthew Passion [Palm Sunday] or the St. John Passion [Good Friday]. Or you can watch one of those lives of Jesus, all of which conclude with the gruesome events of Holy Week in Jerusalem in AD 30: Pasolini, Zeffirelli, Mel Gibson or that old Hollywood epic, *Ben Hur*. None of these are the same as attending the Holy Week liturgies and especially the Easter Triduum, yet they contribute greatly to our not missing Holy Week, to our not letting Holy Week slip through our fingers.

The challenge which the indispensable confinement Covid-19 has imposed on us puts before us one which was raised in the very earliest days of Christianity, that challenge to worship God "*in spirit and in truth*," in defence of which the proto-martyr Stephen lost his life. In medieval monasteries where many of the monks were priests and celebrated Mass every day, they often took a "*desert day*" when they denied themselves the privilege of saying Mass. It was an act of self-denial and of piety. Covid-19 and the valiant attempts to tame it have imposed *desert months* on those millions of Christians for whom Sunday Mass is the high point of their week. We are all struggling to make sense of what is happening in our midst, in our towns, villages and in our parish communities, none of which makes the story of the first Holy Week any less relevant; the challenge to us is to relive it this year *in spirit and in truth*.

Father Patrick